ECONOMY AND EFFICIENCY IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION IN INDIA

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FORUM OF FREE ENTERPRISE
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"People must come to accept private enterprise not as a necessary evil, but as an affirmative good."

—Eugene Black

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INDIA may or may not be in the midst of the most dangerous decades. But it is definitely in the midst of confusion of ideas and ideals. We seem to proceed along the lines of a marriage of opposites. This may be a good intellectual game in dialectics. Even the Ramayana said despondently: "Beneath the pairs-of-opposites must the world suffer without ceasing." In modern politics, we pay a heavy price if we adopt two-faced attitude towards political and economic problems.

Confusion and hypocrisy is inevitable if, for example, we profess and not practice democracy. Or, when we loudly talk of socialism, along with ostentatious living, little austerity, high consumption on the part of the ruling elites. A Western observer remarks: "No perceptive foreign observer can help being struck by the ironic contrast between the socialistic opinions voiced by many Indian leaders and the fact that they seem to find it quite natural to be surrounded by hordes of underfed servants, bearers, sweepers and low caste-men." Leaders, high and low, who want to chase the English language out send children in their family to expensive public schools or educational institutions run by foreign missions. We indignantly denounce corruption among public servants but condone it in public life.

Against such background, how do we view the state of India, now in the seventeenth year of Independence? We are not exactly static, but we are being pushed about aimlessly all around. We are puzzled, perplexed, frustrated. We are unclear in our minds as to where we are going. Certainly it seems that effete æstheticism and arrogance for ideas in abstract will not take us ahead in

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the long journey of development and evolution of our society. Neither will it help us to indulge in a nostalgia for our immediate past, which is now a final finished epoch, nor to nurse a longing for a brave utopia by venerating a hotch-potch of foreign ideas.

Most people are agreed that there is a malaise in the body politic. We whimper, complain or occasionally shout about it. The time will not be far distant when a deeper diagnosis will have to be made. In the meantime, in the more responsible public discussions, certain causative factors—political, economic, social, educational, cultural—are analysed to explain some particular aspect of the malaise.

My attempt will be to take a view from the vantage point of the edifice of the administration. Till we build a highly articulated society composed of diverse skills, administration will continue to be the focal point of many national activities. Administration, primarily, though not wholly, functions through forms of mechanism; as such it is the most visible form of Government. Hence it is that what all we have to say for or against the Government converges towards administration—the only instrument at present in our hands to achieve national aims and aspirations.

The burden of my theme is the pronounced maladjustment of Government and politics with the administration and the consequences thereof. One of the deeper symptoms of this maladjustment is the prevalence of corruption in public life about which we hear so much throughout the length and breadth of the country.

We are accustomed to an idealised version of corruption, as India in the past was administered by a corporation of Civil Servants of high integrity and great ability. We may also remind ourselves of the historic fact that the same body originated from a sink of corruption. Gradually, the evil of corruption was flushed out of the system. Corruption, where it existed, was locatable, manageable and remediable. This form of corruption was financial; it involved two individuals—one the giver and the other the receiver.

The impact of mass democracy on administration has altered this simple face of corruption. More sinister than the financial corruption is the corruption of the public morals of the ruling elite. Where an intelligentsia is in power and power corrupts it, then the malaise spreads from the summit to the lower strata of the political and social hierarchy. As a Turkish proverb picturesquely says: "A fish rots from head downwards." This sort of corruption does not just affect two individuals. It affects wide groups and sections of national society. It causes widespread injustice to many persons. It prostitutes the administrative machinery to gain its ends.

Corruption is by no means inevitable, because of statism resulting from the new economic policy. No doubt, opportunities for corruption must have increased vastly from 1952 onwards, owing to State trading, controls, licensing, bulk-buying of foodstuffs and raw materials, etc. Despite this disturbing factor, it would have been possible to maintain a bright record if the political forces were strong and there was not that kind of a latent civil war between the political party apparatus and the body of permanent officials.

Corruption today is the unmistakable sign of weakened authority and the lowering of public morals. It is also the first sure sign of social disintegration. They are attributable to the fact that the new rulers, when they came to power, had no clear ideas for keeping the Civil Service and the administrative machinery under effective political control. They wrongly assumed that control is automatic in a parliamentary system. If they had looked into their British precedent, they would have noticed that, in Britain, political reform had preceded Civil Service reform, so that Government was in a strong position relatively to the Civil Service. The bureaucracy which the independent Indian Government inherited was efficient, but it was in no sense a homogeneous national bureaucracy; it had grown up as an auxiliary part of the Imperial Corps of Officials. Hence they were not strong bureaucracies, with courage enough to keep the Ministers and elective elements in their place.

In order to gain control over the bureaucracy, the Ministers and party men of dubious virtue and doubtful competency sheltering under the ministerial wings, began to browbeat the officials, scared them with their exercise of authority and started a witch-hunt for the so-called corrupt elements in the public services. The bureaucracy caved in; to save its skin, it became subservient and sycophantic to the predatory power of politicians. It was to the advantage of the corrupt elements in public life to weaken the administration; they could not have had their way with a strong administration. Behind the facade of the respected old guard of national leaders, the new political groups, enjoying the taste of political power, were directing and propelling the baggage train of ruling party politics and economics. A politically unreformed political party is responsible for the virus of corruption in India's body politic.

Corruption in public life is an important subject by itself. I have dealt with it cursorily as I have to tread my way through it to my next theme, namely, loss of efficiency, misuse of resources and manhandling of personnel. Since Independence, we have assembled together certain resources, man-power and ideas. We must sort out our immediate problems as distinct from long-term aspirations. We must utilise old practices to meet new problems, to render every duty, which is less businesslike, more businesslike. In other words, we must have sound and positive ideas on economy and efficiency in Public Administration.

What do the two terms imply? In the good old days, economy laid emphasis on regularity and prudent administration rather on policy. The Gladstonian era of politics stressed the saving of candle-ends, in other words, good housekeeping. Even today, nobody will deny the need for good housekeeping. Governments cannot be imprudent borrowers and improvident spendthrifts. Nevertheless, it would be more in accordance with present times to say that it is the policy pursued by the Government which determines the major portion of national expenditure.

The traditional system of good housekeeping—sound conservative estimates and an establishment consisting of a compact manageable staff—has been completely distorted by modern public finance, with its high taxation derived from diverse sources, both direct and indirect, augmented somewhat lavishly by foreign aids, gifts, loans, credits, etc., and by the state of staff management by an immense increase in the size of the establishment, the technical, scientific and managerial personnel outnumbering the administrative part and the ever-widening circle of governmental activities invading every aspect of the citizen's life. Both estimates and establishment are now swollen into unmanageable proportions.

In the present-day concept, economy and efficiency are functionally related to the implementation of national policy rather than reduction of staff and expenditure. True economy is to be achieved by so organising the work of Government that it can be executed with the maximum use of resources. If the work-load remains constant or actually increases, reduction of staff beyond a certain point simply results in work being left undone or poorly done. If the reduction of cost becomes an end in itself, it becomes necessary to establish priorities, postponing tasks that are less important and using available resources or those that are more important.

Consequently, Governments must have the capacity to frame correct policies and, what is more, to assume responsibility for ensuring that tasks are not imposed on the administration beyond the financial and personnel resources that they are prepared to make available. The full assumption of ministerial responsibility is a necessary condition to achieve efficiency and economy in administration. Given reasonable tasks to perform and protected against disrupting political or party pressures, the administration can be held responsible for the efficient and economical performance of its work.

These are very general statements; they are also simple. Why should they not be put into practice and see whether or not they yield good dividend or results? There is, however, a snag in following such a course. In

India, problems which are real, practical, prosaic, pedestrian, manageable are transformed into theories and made into obsessions. Then they are sloganised; slogans are easy to shout about some virtuous dogma or creed. Changes which only need to be quietly made are presented in the form of decisions demanding the exercise of national will.

Apart from this aberration, any practical or simple course is confronted with the internal stresses and strains of party politics at all levels. The contradictions within the party politics have a direct effect on the weakening of the administration. This is an aspect that seems to have received little attention. It is as well to have a look at three of them by way of illustration.

It seems apparent that we are set, for some decades at any rate, to live under a one-party rule. It cannot be helped, if two-party democracy cannot be established, though our Constitution was based on the premise of the checks and balances of a two-party system. It must be taken for granted that the one-party State would be authoritarian, tempered, let us hope, by democratic ideals. In any case, it should be strong if not wholly authoritarian. If you look through its impressive exterior, you will find it weak inside. Besides, the one-party State is not a monolith, as it is badly punctured in places.

The forces of disintegration are insidiously working within the Centre. Political power is shifting to the States. The balance of economic forces is assisting the shift. Industrialisation with its accent on the Public Sector controlled by the Centre is no doubt a centripetal force. The largest sector of the economy is, however, agriculture. Here the forces of backwardness, traditionalism and social resistance to change are strongly entrenched. At the lower levels, power has come to rest in the newly emerging class of rural elite whose authority and influence is being built through the *Panchayati Raj*. The rural elite identifies whatever national sense he feels not with some authority but with the absence of authority—particularism and casteism are synonymous and so far as there is a

tradition, it is a tradition which favours Indian weakness and disunion.

This is the base on which rests the leadership at State level—principally of the caste elites. They are expected to be the political intermediaries between the Centre and masses. Their power and status will be at the expense of the Centre. They have no particular interest in national leadership.

If the State leaders are weak owing to groupism or internal faction, then they become the satellites of the Centre. If they are effective party bosses, stable as authoritarian rulers with political power resting on the support of the local caste elites, they are more powerful than the leaders at the national level. Only, they do not exhibit it, being outwardly deferential.

National leadership has been caught between a centralised Union Government, dominated by the personality of the Prime Minister, and the strongly developing regional caste and linguistic society. Once transferred to the Centre, leaders at national level lose influence and support in their own State. Their image is dimmed; they are just individuals in the vastly growing entourage of the Prime Minister.

Secondly the ruling party is a party without ideology. In Indian conditions that is no particular disadvantage. The party, however, feels that, in an age of ideology, it needs a sort of precise ideological image, at least for seeking a diversion from the party's main preoccupation of reconciling conflicting group interests, if not for anything else. This problem is getting intractable in the lower echelons of the party hierarchy. So a needless and a somewhat sterile dialetics has developed over the opposites—the Public and Private Sectors.

The dialectics is compounded of curious amalgams. One is the very characteristic Indian prejudice against the new entrepreneurial and industrial class which has emerged from the trading and moneylending castes with their instinct for "fast buck", social clannishness and certain marked partiality for dishonest methods. Indian

intellectuals are unconsciously being too British by according to the industrialists a low standing in society. The British aristocracy embraced the rising entrepreneur. Karl Marx wryly remarked that the British *bourgeoisie*, instead of liquidating their aristocracy, had married their daughters. In Indian conditions, marriage is no solvent for class or caste barriers. Then, there is the Leninist doctrine of occupying the commanding heights of economic power; at present, the Public Sector controls about 10 per cent and it is most unlikely to exceed 20 per cent of the national economy. All this amalgam goes under the resounding name of "Socialist pattern." It only raises a dilemma, causes confusion. Both private and public sectors should form co-operative parts of an integrated national effort, with interchangeability of ideas, methods and personnel. What is urgent is to get more technologically trained people from both the sectors into positions of power.

In this one-party State, devoid of any ideology, there is a complete blurring of party, parliamentary, democratic leadership by the cult of Charismatic leadership—a totally new phenomenon unknown to Gandhian epoch. Says an American political scientist:

"Only those who express the charisma of the nation are fit to guide action in society. Those who do not share in this national authority and even more than those who do not proclaim and manifest their attachment to the realm of the ideal, are thought to share very little of the Charisma. Traditional religious leaders, elders of kinship groups, and businessmen—all fall outside this circle of the Charisma of nationality within which political leaders, agitational journalists find themselves. The leaders of a nationalist movement and the rulers of a new country are the most charismatic persons of their country."

These and other developing contradictions inject a reality to politics and government. A contemporary would do well to look at the living reality rather than put his faith in political myths. The politics of mass democracy does not confirm to the text-book description of a constitu-

tion or even its written words. It is the politics of sheer opportunism.

Nay, it is the politics of Power. The respect shown to the constitution is nominal, outwardly deferential. The startling development in a modern state is in enormous Concentration of Power, particularly in the Central Government. Modern oligarchs are incomparably better equipped with Power than were their predecessors. No wonder historian Burckhardt wrote: "Power is of its nature evil, whoever wields it. It is not stability but lust."

There is a way of seeing the reality of Power. Our constitution has been drawn on the political experience of the Anglo-Saxon society. It leaves, as a written constitution, many crucial things unsaid, though it says lot of things on the details of Government. Whenever a gap has to be filled, our constitutional *pundits* turn to Dicey, Barriedale Keith or Ivor Jennings for enlightenment. For a change, I shall turn to another figure who throws an unexpected light on some of our contemporary realities.

Walter Bagehot was an English banker and in his days a great political journalist. A century ago, he wrote about the English Constitution. Its merit was it became out of date as soon as it was published. Disraeli's Reforms Act abruptly terminated the classic parliamentary government which Bagehot had set out to describe. But Bagehot's technique of analysis led to the formulation of some brilliant ideas which are still full of meaning. For instance, he explained that one part of the English Constitution was made up of dignified parts—the Monarchy, the House of Lords—which made impact on the public mind. The other —the efficient part, more modern—was the secret machinery of decision making. This led him to describe the Cabinet as the "hyphen which joins, a buckle which fastens the legislative part of the State to the executive part of the State."

In a recent essay on Bagehot, Mr. R. H. S. Crossman, a Labour M.P. and a well-known writer, has put forward an interesting, if somewhat controversial, viewpoint, that, in post-war Britain, the Cabinet Government has been finally transformed into Prime Ministerial Government. Bagehot's

description of hyphen and buckle now becomes one single man. Mr. Crossman may or may not be right in his view that the Cabinet as a political institution has declined in England.

Notwithstanding the constitutional provisions, we started in actual practice with a Prime Ministerial Government. The Cabinet there is, very much a centrepiece: through it papers, reports, memoranda pass and repass. It is a dignified part, visible to the public. It is the Prime Ministerial Government and not the Cabinet Government, that well fitted into Indian conditions. The Prime Minister effortlessly became the apex of the pre-existing centralised administrative machine as well as of a centralised political machine which the nationalist leaders had built up. This, as well as the pronounced unitary bias of the Central Government, has brought an immense accretion of power to the Prime Minister. In this situation (to quote Mr. Crossman) "loyalty has become the supreme virtue and independence of thought a dangerous adventure."

Individual Ministers under this dispensation owe their allegiance not to the Cabinet collectively but to the Prime Minister, who gave them the job. A minister is now the agent of the Prime Minister. Lord Home, as Foreign Secretary to Mr. MacMillan, wrote bluntly in a newspaper article, that every Cabinet Minister is the Prime Minister's agent and his assistant. There is no question about it. If the Prime Minister wanted to take a certain step, the Cabinet Minister would either have to agree, argue out in the Cabinet or resign.

The same picture is broadly true of India. Only, a Minister here does not resign at the behest of the Prime Minister. In secular India, a Minister is removed by a ritualistic process, such as the 'K' Plan. It is not without meaning that three senior Ministers in the recent debate in Parliament pathetically pleaded that they were only carrying out the Prime Minister's policy.

If the Prime Ministerial Government and not the Cabinet Government is the new secret of the Constitution, wherein is the secret of its efficiency? That must be located in the vast apparatus of power which the State now ad-

ministers at the Centre, at the State level and locally in the districts. This apparatus is not fully charged with power and to that extent is still weak in the light of its performance.

I have earlier referred to the maladjustment between democratic leadership and the administrative services. The working relationship between the Minister and the Civil Servant, though nowhere precisely defined, has not yet been satisfactorily worked out. The relation between the two cannot be relegated to the simple proposition that the Civil Servant is just a subordinate of the Minister. At the lowest echelons of the party machinery and the administrative hierarchy, there is nearly a fusion of the two. Elsewhere that part of the administrative machinery, which has not been corroded by political corruption, has been weakened by the servility of the Civil Servants.

Secondly, very few people know that the Indian Administrative system has been built on the Benthamite ideas of a hierarchy of individual officials, related to one another in a military form of subordination with a perfectly clear chain of command. It harmonised the unity of structural design with the advantages of division of labour. The impact of one-party State has made a nonsense of all this, resulting in the disappearance of individual initiative at all levels, non-accountability in the chain of command, above all the collapse of internal discipline.

Thirdly, the Prime Ministerial Government, by its nature, has to assume a vigorous leadership over the Civil Service. It would be presumptuous on my part to comment on the Prime Minister's leadership over the Civil Service. I can only indicate what should have happened and what actually has happened.

Writing about the French Civil Service in a periodical, a British executive in an international company says that General de Gaulle neither trained the new Civil Servants nor gave them their striking qualities. But he knows how to lead them. He further goes on to say that these top Civil Servants of France are a new brand. They are often astonishingly young. Is one being too British to suggest that their ideal appears to be something like the aloof tradi-

tions of the I.C.S., but brought up-to-date with this scientific age? Something like this could have happened in India, after Independence.

What has actually happened in independent India is this: the Civil Servants are comparatively well paid and work in decent material conditions. At the same time, they are distrusted at higher levels; at district level, they are supervised by partymen of dubious virtue. The expanding nature of the functions of Government made the Civil Servants more valuable than ever as specialists and scapegoats. Partymen prefer the Civil Service in the latter role but Ministers at the Centre engaged in governing are disposed to be more tolerant and understanding.

As you descend down the escalator from the higher regions of the Prime Ministerial Government and touch the ground floor of the district administration, you see glaring maladjustment between the democratic apparatus and the administrative machinery, marked warping of both, less efficiency and more confusion.

When independence came, two facts of district administration were involved in the process of democratisation at the grass roots: one, the power of active administration exercised through an individual as heretofore—the District Officer acting as the agent or the representative of the democratically governed State Government. And the other the power of deliberative administration vesting in rural democratic bodies.

In the sacred cause of planning and development, the administrative machinery is being misused by what is officially described as the democratically decentralised organs of the *Panchayati Raj.*

The Collector, no longer an irresponsible bureaucrat, has to play "politics" with the Chairman of the *Zila Parishad,* one of the local shining lights of the ruling party, often unscrupulous, always authoritarian. If he happens to belong to the faction in the Congress opposed to the State Chief Minister, he attempts to share power with a strong Collector. Otherwise, he makes it unmistakably clear that he is the boss. As he usually has powerful friends at the State level, he can always get the Collector transferred.

Real power, however, rests with the *Samiti* President at the intermediate bloc level. The President is free from the vigilance of the prying eye of a Collector. His symbol of status is the jeep at his service; he has at his beck and call the Block Development Officer, who, in some States, is a junior officer of the Indian Administrative Service. A word in the ear of his ministerial friends will secure the transfer of this official minion if he does not humour the local contractor, road builder and the new rich. The *Panchayat Samitis* and their members owe no accountability to any one in the handling of public affairs. The manner in which they misuse the machinery of administration has been described by an anonymous contributor to an Indian periodical: "They lure in Block Development Officer into the chess of factionalism or at least assess his merit by the degree to which he can minister to the machination of party politics. Inefficient sycophants promoted from the ranks have gradually wrecked the morale of the services and one sees the sorry spectacle, therefore, of a comparatively efficient and neutral administrative force being gradually drawn into the slush of the political game."

It is not my purpose here to suggest any precise therapy for the maladies I have sketched above, for the good reason they await a clinical examination. I would only reiterate that cumulatively they are a canker which benumbs the policy-making capacity of the Government and consequently of its efficiency. There are also other contributory and causative factors working to the same end. Basic to the functioning of democracy is the proper relation of politics to administration. We may rid ourselves of the misconception that administration stands upon an essentially different basis in a democratic State from that on which it stands in a non-democratic State. So far as administrative functions are concerned, all Governments have a strong structural likeness.

As a nation, we are somewhat crude democrats. Politicians should take heed of the fact that mere unschooled genius for affairs will not save them from sad blunders in administration. You do not govern just because you occupy the seat of authority. When we as a people become more

adept in self-governing, we will learn to use administration as a means of putting our politics into convenient practice, to manipulate what is democratically political into what is administratively possible.

We as a people have become insensitive to the first principles of politics and the ideas related to them. Since Independence, political consciousness has steadily waned. Politics and every activity connected with it is left to "professionals" who are well ensconced in every seat of authority and power. There is a general dislike of the State and its rulers. With the expression of dissatisfaction towards them, interest in politics ceases.

A prolonged state of such insensitivity would be fatal. Demoratic politics is sustained by dissidence rooted in moral principles. There still exists in India a liberal, radical tradition, which is the moral heir to the philosophic radicalism of the nineteenth century. One hopes this latent force would come up to the surface and act as a counterpoise to the authoritarian forces of the present one-party State. A dissident may not necessarily have to be right today. His ideas will not be popular. But his voice will be that of Tomorrow. Dissident opinion and dissident groups can prevent the debauching of our conscience by State power; they strengthen the moral vertebra of democratic politics. More than that, they impart moral courage to speak out and campaign for a cause; they keep alive moral conscience.

India broke the fetters of her political slavery with ethical and moral hammers. In order to retain her freedom and escape from another form of enslavement, she needs moral courage, of which the poet said:

"They are slaves who will not face
Hatred, slander and disgrace
Rather than in silence shrink
From the truth they needest must think
They are slaves who will not be
In the right with two or three."

Like patriotism, moral courage alone is not enough. There must be awareness of the need for change in a society now in a state of transition from tradition to modernity; of

the factors which bring about the change; the acceptance of the price for change. Everybody pays lip service for economic growth and change. While one section perpetuates itself in political power and is strongly entrenched in privileges, it merrily calls upon others to pay the price. Any change is inequitable, because it alters the existing social balance. Indian society is basically non-competitive, complexly hierarchical. In the realm of the *Panchayati Raj*, dominant landowning castes fight each other for power and prestige; they will, in due course, establish a stranglehold on the economically backward cultivating and artisan castes. Higher up the hierarchy, "the old men of the revolution seem to hang on to power even if they are approaching their dotage, while the young impatient of office are kept out." Afraid of losing power, the ruling party has built up a complex system of checks and balances but at a high price on efficiency. Because the system is artificial, it continually tends to break down; so it is shored up by more conventions and more political hocuspocus.

Behind any form of self-perpetuation and stagnation, lurk the elements of disintegration, chaos and confusion. You cannot push too far frustration among the intellectuals and the educated persons, who see the emptiness behind the propaganda for national unity and other slogans. You cannot also for long contain their anger mounting against the "immobilism" of the leaders.

It is a mere delusion to hold that we have insulated ourselves against the blasts of cold war by a foreign policy in support of which we keep a steady flow of self-righteous moralisation. That is a pleasant delusion. We are very much in the midst of war of ideas. India started the process of Westernisation—or modernisation if that is the more apt term—long ago, albeit on a modest scale. This process was assisted by ideas derived from the cosmopolitan, liberal civilisation of the modern West. The period of confrontation was long enough for Western ideas to grow and mature in the Indian soil.

The twentieth century Russian revolution, now blowing over the underdeveloped societies, is also an essay in Westernisation. Only it has introduced fermentation in ideas

through its slogan for planning and heavy industries, largely related to economic and military power. It holds out a carrot in the shape of rising standard of living to the underprivileged masses after passing through an undefined phase of harsh and cruel sacrifices in living conditions.

The result, as Pasternak put it, is just one more nation-State. Or pithily, in the words of the late John Strachey, "the Communists' means have been terrible, their results commonplace."

It is not at all inevitable that we should be enticed by communist totalitarianism. We may, (to me it is not a certainty) if we wantonly pull down the social structure with our own hands by deliberately poisoning it. Such a contingency need not trouble us just at present. What we need most is the courage to face some stern Indian realities: no more the use of the past as an alibi for our shortcomings, and poor performances; no want of faith either in all forms of rational change.

Arthur Koestler recently used three lines of prayer the source of which he said was unknown but was repeated at the end of each meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous. It is fittingly appropriate to repeat them, as a conclusion to my thesis, dedicated as this country is to Prohibition:

"God grant me the serenity to accept
things I cannot change:
And courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference."

The views expressed in this booklet are not necessarily the views of the Forum of Free Enterprise.

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"Free Enterprise was born with man and shall survive as long as man survives."

—A. D. Shroff

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